Illinois State University grad student workers to take strike vote

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Graduate student workers at Illinois State University (ISU) in Normal, Illinois will vote April 2 on whether to authorize strike action against the university administration, which has dragged out negotiations over a labor agreement for a year and a half. The student workers are organized in the Graduate Workers Union (GWU), which is affiliated with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73.

The GWU/SEIU have been engaged in negotiations with ISU since October of 2019, shortly after the union was legally recognized by the National Labor Relations Board. Since then, the university has resisted coming to an agreement on what would be the first GWU/SEIU contract at ISU.

The conditions for ISU graduate student workers are among the worst in the region. The average stipend is just $9,441 for the nine-month academic year. This rate is considerably lower than other Midwestern schools like Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, University of Illinois or University of Wisconsin.

Along with increases in wages, graduate student workers are demanding full access to health care, including vision and dental, and greater protections for international students who are often charged with more fees than other students. Another central demand is to eliminate deductions from their pay in the form of mandatory administrative fees that are forced upon students at the beginning of each semester.

According to a statement published on the GWU's website, grad student pay is so poor that the university has recently been in danger of violating state minimum wage laws. The statement noted that some grad students this year received a minor increase in pay to stay above the $11 an hour minimum wage that went into effect in Illinois on January 1, 2021.

After the GWU announced they were considering a strike authorization, University President Larry Deitz responded, saying only, "We believe there is much to be accomplished through additional dialogue. I encourage continued commitment to good faith negotiations." Deitz, who is set to retire in June, was recently awarded a $46,000 bonus on top of his yearly salary of $375,000 by the ISU Board of Trustees.

Bargaining sessions continued yesterday on March 18. At the time of this writing, no progress in negotiations has been announced. The GWU has called a full membership meeting on March 26 to discuss negotiations and the possibility of a strike.

On April 2, GWU members will vote to authorize a strike. However, as the leaders of the union have made explicitly clear in their statements to the press, the April 2 vote will not be the beginning of a strike but will merely allow the union bargaining team to call another strike vote if they deem it necessary at some unspecified point in the future.

The central obstacle the grad students face is the SEIU, which has a long record of selling out the workers they ostensibly represent. The SEIU maintains the closest ties to the national and state Democratic Party and has long signed sweetheart contracts with employers, which traded away the rights and living standards of its members and guaranteed "labor peace" in exchange for the ability to collect union dues from largely low-paid workers. This has enabled the SEIU to gain large numbers of dues-paying members and for its highly paid executives to rise to the top of the American labor bureaucracy.

Last September, the SEIU shut down a 10-day strike by 4,000 service workers at the University of Illinois-Chicago, who were demanding improved wages and protections against COVID-19. The deal signed by the SEIU only raised wages to the Chicago minimum of

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$15 per hour. A month later, the SEIU ended a 12-day strike by nursing home workers demanding raises and more protections in facilities that have been devastated by the pandemic. The agreement guaranteed a minimum pay of just $11.10 for nursing home workers, with most employees receiving a raise of only $1 or $2 per hour.

Once a contractual agreement is reached between the ISU and SEIU, the union will be legally permitted to start collecting dues payments from grad students. As it stands, as far as the SEIU is concerned, reaching *any* agreement, even one that would lower wages, would be a win as they would gain a new section of funding through dues payments.

The possibility of a strike at ISU comes as a university strike wave is emerging. Currently 3,000 graduate student workers are engaged in an indefinite strike at Columbia University in New York City, where student workers are demanding higher wages, affordable housing, better health care coverage and improved working conditions.

Students at Kenyon College in Ohio have also recently authorized a strike against unsafe work conditions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Likewise, more than 1,200 New York University graduate students have signed a petition demanding the resumption of negotiations for a fair labor contract in response to a lack of sufficient health and safety measures.

Grad student workers must look to the working class to support their struggles, not to the trade union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party, which are forcing educators back into unsafe schools and preparing savage austerity measures to pay for the growing government debt.

The way forward for graduate students at ISU and other campuses is to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to unite their struggles across campuses and with educators and broader sections of the working class against both corporate-controlled parties and the capitalist system they defend.

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